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How is Dissensus Possible in Consensual Theories? Habermas and Brandom

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ABSTRACT: The presentation focuses on the problem of dissensus in Brandom's and Habermas' theories of communication and social action. The main questions it raises concern: the concept of dissensus, the main characteristics of it, the possibility of its occurring and indispensable conditions for it. It also claims that Brandom's account, in opposition to that of Habermas, is more likely to permit rationally based dissensus.

KEY WORDS: dissensus, consensus, argumentation, rationality, communication, Habermas, Brandom

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I would like to concentrate on the problem of dissensus in two philosophical theories of communication and social action, referring to the conceptions of Jürgen Habermas and Robert B. Brandom as presented in the former's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981, 1987) and in the latter's *Making It Explicit* (1998) and *Articulating Reasons* (2001). What is specific to these conceptions is that they both put particular stress on the conditions of acquiring agreement between the members of society or, more precisely, between the participants in discourse. Factors such as speaking the same language, common lifestyles, shared social practices, common conceptual systems, the ability to take part in the "game of giving and asking for reasons", or in argumentation, seem to form the grounds for constructive debate and to lead to consensus between arguers. But the conceptions in question seem not to put enough stress on considering the possibility of dissensus and elaborating on its conditions and limits. However, it would be worth raising the question as to whether the reasonable dissensus – i.e. being a result of exchanging reasons between rational agents – is possible at all in consensus-oriented theories. Below I would like to explore this possibility, trying to extract a notion of dissensus from the conceptions of Habermas and Brandom. In doing this, I will focus on some essential aspects of the problem, but my considerations do not aspire to give a full and detailed account of it – instead, I would like only to draw a general and tentative sketch that indicates its most important features.

Both Habermas' and Brandom's accounts are mainly perceived as being consensual in essence. They are both aimed at addressing similar problems, although from partly different perspectives, and, with regard their results, they are thought of as overlapping in many respects. Actually, both philosophers have discussed their common concerns in an exchange of papers (Habermas 2000, Brandom 2000) and, on

the face of it, their ideas are sometimes regarded as complementary, as requiring to be supplemented by each other (Giovanoli 2001, Sharp 2003). I will try to show that one of the central differences between them pertains precisely to the question of dissensus.

2. REACHING UNDERSTANDING *VERSUS* REJECTING CLAIMS IN HABERMAS: POSING A PROBLEM

Habermas' theory of communication is generally directed at reaching understanding, where "reaching understanding" means "reaching agreement among speaking and acting subjects" (Habermas 1984, p. 286). The author of *Theory of Communicative Action* says that communicative practice is "oriented to achieving, sustaining, and renewing consensus", and that any dissensus is something especially undesirable, as it is something "to be repaired" (Habermas 1984, pp. 17-18). In this context the question arises whether varieties of different, sometimes incommensurable, opinions, beliefs, worldviews or cultures may exist within one communicative community – a community of rationally acting and communicating subjects. Does every sort of disagreement have to be overcome in time through the process of rational argumentation or is there some room for essential differences in worldviews and lifestyles? Do all groups with beliefs different from those of the rest of society have to be excluded from social discourse, being regarded as irrational?

In approaching this problem in Habermas, it would be useful, at the outset, to remember that he defines "agreement" as "common *convictions*" (Habermas 1984, p. 287). But at the same time, in the next sentence of the same passage, he writes:

The speech act of one person succeeds only if the other accepts the offer contained in it by taking [however implicitly] a "yes" or "no" position on a validity claim that is in principle criticizable (Habermas 1984, p. 287).

At first glance, it appears a sort of contradiction that "common *convictions*" may be reached by one of the parties' saying "no", and that one can "accept an offer" by simultaneously "taking 'no' position on a validity claim", which means: by contemporaneously rejecting it. To ponder this matter, it will be convenient, following Habermas, to consider different fields of arguments and to ask in which of them the possibility of disagreement is more probable, and in which less.

3. THE POSSIBILITY OF DISSENSUS IN DIFFERENT FIELDS OF ARGUMENT IN HABERMAS

In the first part of *Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas differentiates among five various kinds of argumentative fields, which differ from one another in the sort of validity claims they advance as well as in the sort of justification they require. Accordingly, he distinguishes: firstly, theoretical discourse, comprising either assertions about the world or instrumental intervention into it – this sort of discourse puts forward validity claims referring either to a proposition's truth or to the efficacy of teleological actions; secondly, practical discourse, concerning moral or practical statements, whose validity claims refer to the rightness of norms of action; thirdly, aesthetic criticism, which makes evaluative judgments and discusses the adequacy of standards of value; fourthly, therapeutic critique, which is aimed at expressing the subject's feelings and emotions and which advances validity claims as to the truthfulness or sincerity of these expressions; and fifthly, explicative discourse directed at clarifying both the content and forms of linguistic expressions, and hence

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at reflecting on the very means of reaching understanding between discourse participants – its validity claims concern the comprehensibility or well-formedness of the symbolic constructs or claims that are set forth (Habermas 1984, p. 23). Of course, all the dimensions constitute distinct areas of argument only under theoretical analysis, since in practice some of them often overlap; especially therapeutic critique, with its claim to truthfulness, necessarily implies other fields, for example, that concerned with discourse concerning efficacy of action.

Now, if we were to decide in which of the aforementioned fields the dissensus is the most likely to occur, the first candidate would probably be aesthetic criticism. It is pretty natural to assume that standards of beauty, or good taste, are not the same for all people, let alone all cultures and epochs. Therefore there is nothing strange or controversial in having different opinions about the aesthetic values of a film, literary work, sculpture or painting. Even when our adversary's argumentation is extensive, well-justified, and the conclusion seems to be irrefutable, we do not have to share his view, not being bound to feel convinced by it. The second candidate might be the therapeutic critique. Although the means of expression of someone's experience and states of mind do not much differ within the same culture, it is possible to question someone's sincerity or truthfulness, or to regard someone's limitations concerning her or his different expressions as irrational (Cf. Habermas 1984, pp. 20-21). The third field to be taken into consideration is the practical discourse. Here, at least at first glance, the occurrence of disagreement seems to be less probable than in the evaluative discourse, but nonetheless still possible (for Habermas, who tends to take the cognitive position in ethics, any "practical questions can in principle be settled by way of argumentation" (Habermas 1984, p. 19). Although for Habermas moral dilemmas within one community normally refer to particular moral cases and not to generally accepted norms, there still remains the problem of application or interpretation of these norms. The next, fourth, dimension is the theoretical discourse. Of all the fields mentioned above, in this one the possibility of dissensus appears to be least probable. As long as the participants of argumentation remain rational, they are both open to their opponent's reasons and capable of recognizing the soundness of these reasons, and by such means they are also able to reach understanding: to choose the better, agreed upon claim. In Habermas' view, consensus is regarded as the assumed and immanent end of such arguments, as long as the exchange of reasons is rational and free of any external compulsion. Dissensus is here regarded as something unnatural and undesirable.

There remains another fifth and last dimension of arguments to be discussed in this respect. In the explicative discourse it is difficult to imagine that dissensus might even be possible. For this kind of discourse is thought to be an antidote to obstacles met in reciprocal communication. In the face of such disturbances, a rational person resorts to reflecting on linguistic rules, and on the mere way of reaching understanding, in order to check "whether symbolic expressions are produced according to rule, in conformity with the corresponding system of generative rules" (Habermas 1984, p. 22). The natural consequence of this procedure is a solution of these problems and coming to terms both as to the meaning and forms of linguistic expressions. Would a conscious disagreement about meaning be possible among two parties oriented toward mutual understanding? It seems that the answer is no. Here, dissensus would simply mean misunderstanding and lack of communication. Similarly, the lack of agreement about means and conditions of agreement would also lead to a breakdown in communication. If we do not agree as to the terms of

agreement, then we will not agree about any other issue and not reach any understanding. Habermas writes:

Explicative discourse is a form of argumentation in which the comprehensibility, well-formedness, or rule-correctness of symbolic expressions is no longer naively supposed or contested but is thematized as a controversial claim (Habermas 1984, p. 22).

This means that the conditions of consensus – when they start to be perceived as controversial – may become, and actually are, a subject for debate; but, at the same time, the mere debating of them still presupposes a minimal agreement as to the question of how to discuss the terms of agreement. Otherwise no agreement and no communication would occur.

4. REACHING UNDERSTANDING *VERSUS* REJECTING CLAIMS: SUGGESTED SOLUTION

In the face of the above considerations, then, the question of reconciling within one framework two contrary notions – agreement resting “on common convictions”, on the one hand, with rejection of a claim, on the other – may have the following solution. The common convictions have to refer, first of all, to the common meaning of the symbolic expressions used in the discourse, as well as to the rules of forming them; simultaneously, they have to pertain to conditions of reaching understanding. In other words, agreement has to be about matters belonging to explicative discourse. Meanwhile, disagreement may – though it does not have to – concern only the other forms of argumentation. However, in Habermas, it follows from not satisfying one or more common, generally agreed upon conditions of reaching consensus by one or both sides of the debate. And this seems to be the only place for dissensus in *Theory of Communicative Action*. But what is characteristic of Habermas is that disagreement, if it occurs, is rather temporary in its nature: as long as the conditions of free, unconstrained discourse are satisfied, any dissensus would be overcome in time. If only the free, reasonable arguers had enough time to lead the discussion as long as needed, and had all the time to form an attitude oriented toward reaching understanding, the argumentation would inevitably result in a coming to terms between both adversaries. Therefore, for Habermas, in the ideal discourse situation, rational agreement is not only available, but also unavoidable.

However, in this wider, historical perspective, reaching consensus does not have to mean that, for example, the proposition agreed upon is, or may be, fixed once for all, irrespective of any specific worldview, historical time, changing social and cultural conditions, and any new knowledge. For Habermas, every claim is “in principle criticizable” (Habermas 1984, p. 287), and for that reason consensus is not only something to be achieved, but also something to be sustained and renewed in the face of new circumstances (Habermas 1984, p. 17). On the other hand, Habermas does not conceive dissensus as a possible, legitimate result of argumentation, but as a midway post on the way to consensus, as an obstacle to be vanquished through the process of exchanging reasons, identifying mistakes and correcting them.

To sum up: although Habermas’ conception is generally aimed at reaching consensus, dissensus is also likely to happen within some forms of argumentation. Yet, in the first place, dissensus cannot involve explicative discourse and, in the second place, it is in principle temporary, in the sense that it is not thought of as being a permanent state, but a thing to be replaced in time by agreement. Dissensus arises from not observing common conditions of reaching understanding by one or both

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arguers; but when these conditions are met, disagreement should disappear. Can dissensus result from different, more fundamental disagreement between the parties of the discussion? Can free and good-willed participants of the argumentation understand each other and agree on the terms of reaching agreement and, despite this agreement, differ in their opinions? In Habermas they cannot.

5. *LEBENSWELT* AND FEASIBILITY OF REASONABLE DISSENSUS IN HABERMAS

IN trying to extract some further important features of potential dissensus in Habermas, it will be useful to turn to one of the main passages in which Habermas characterizes communicative practice:

(...) communicative practice, against the background of a lifeworld, is oriented to achieving, sustaining and renewing consensus – and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims. The rationality inherent in this practice is seen in the fact that a communicatively achieved agreement must be based in the end on reasons. And the rationality of those who participate in this communicative practice is determined by whether, if necessary, they could, under suitable circumstances, provide reasons for their expressions. Thus the rationality proper to the communicative practice of everyday life points to the practice of argumentation as a court of appeal that makes it possible to continue communicative action with other means when disagreement can no longer be repaired with everyday routines and yet are not to be settled by the direct or strategic use of force. For this reason I believe that the concept of communicative rationality, which refers to an unclarified systematic interconnection of universal validity claims, can be adequately explicated only in terms of a theory of argumentation (Habermas 1984, pp. 17-18).

Apart from the features already brought up, the first thing to be noticed in this passage is that communicative practice is always exercised “against the background of a lifeworld”. The second matter to be kept in mind, partly mentioned earlier, is that it is based only on the soundness of reasons, not on any other factor, for example, use of force. Both these points will turn out to be interrelated.

In introducing the problem of the social and cultural context of an individual’s action and process of argumentation, Habermas faces the problem of the rationality of a lifeworld (for the elaborating of this latter concept cf. Habermas 1987, pp. 119-153):

“Even when we are judging the rationality of individual persons, it is not sufficient to resort to this or that expression. The question is, rather, whether A or B or a group of individuals behaves rationally *in general*; whether one may systematically expect that they have good reasons for their expressions and that these expressions are correct or successful in the cognitive dimension, reliable or insightful in the moral-practical dimension, discerning or illuminating in the evaluative dimension, or candid and self-critical in the expressive dimension; that they exhibit understanding in the hermeneutic dimension; or, indeed, whether they are “reasonable” in all these dimensions. When there appears a systematic effect in these respects, across various domains of interaction and over long periods [perhaps even a space of a lifetime], we also speak of a rationality of a *conduct of life*. And in the sociocultural conditions for such a conduct of life there is reflected perhaps the rationality of a lifeworld shared not only by individuals but by collectives as well (Habermas 1984, p. 43).

In relation to this issue, two different problems can be raised. First, if communicative practice is always exercised against the background of a lifeworld, then we can ask: is effective argumentation possible between arguers from two different lifeworlds? Second, in the case when a given *Lebenswelt* is not rational, in Habermas’ terms, but, for example, mythical, then: is rational, effective discussion possible? Or, is it feasible only within the rationalized lifeworld, in which the ultimate court of appeal in

justifying claims is the court of reasons rather than a mythical or aboriginal worldview?

Habermas analyzes this problem by juxtaposing structural differences between “mythical and modern ways of understanding the world” (Habermas 1984, pp. 43 et passim), and then by reconstructing and critically assessing the philosophical and anthropological debate initiated by Peter Winch (*Understanding a Primitive Society*, (Winch 1992)). The debate concerns the question of relativism in rationality, and, indeed, the threat of relativism seems also to endanger the Habermasian project of universal communicative rationality. As Thomas McCarthy, the translator of *Theory of Communicative Action*, noticed:

If the variety of worldviews and forms of life entails an irreducible plurality of standards of rationality, then the concept of communicative rationality could not claim universal significance and a theory of society constructed upon it would be limited from the start to a particular perspective (McCarthy 1984, p. xi).

Actually, Habermas denies the relativistic conclusions of his view. To cut a long story short: he indeed admits that one form of life can be in certain ways more rational than another; for example, a Western, modernized and rationalized worldview is more rational than a mythical one. It is so because, among others, the former is based on reasons that constitute the final resort in justifying claims, whereas the latter is not based, or is not only based, on reasons. In addition, a modern worldview is itself criticizable, whereas the mythical one is not. Sound arguments can undermine or change a given claim of the Western, scientific world-picture, but this same procedure is impossible in a more primitive lifeworld. However, for Habermas, this fact does not entail different, incommensurable standards of rationality. The differences in rationality of various worldviews, carried by cultural traditions, rely not on their substance, but on their formal properties. There are four formal conditions for a lifeworld to be rational:

- a) The cultural tradition must make available formal concepts of objective, social and subjective worlds.... Symbolic expressions can then be produced on a formal level at which they are systematically connected with reasons and accessible to objective assessments.
- b) The cultural tradition must permit a reflective relation to itself; it must be so far stripped of dogmatism as to permit in principle that interpretations stored in tradition be placed in question and subjected to critical revision....
- c) In its cognitive, moral, and evaluative components the cultural tradition must permit a feedback connection with specialized forms of argumentation to such an extent that the corresponding learning processes can be socially institutionalized. In this way cultural subsystems can arise – for science, law and morality, music, art and literature – in which traditions take shape that are supported by arguments rendered fluid through permanent criticism but at the same time professionally secured.
- d) Finally, the cultural tradition must interpret the lifeworld in such a way that action oriented to success can be freed from the imperatives of an understanding that is to be communicatively renewed over and over again and can be at least partially uncoupled from action to reaching understanding. This makes possible a societal institutionalization of purposive-rational action for generalized goals, for example, the formation of subsystems controlled through money and power, for rational economics and rational administration... (Habermas 1984, pp. 71-72).

For this reason, it can be said that, for Habermas, there are no culturally diversified standards of rationality but rather different degrees of rationality. The more formal properties a worldview does possess, the more rational it is. In the ideal situation, people from different lifeworlds, but ones that meet all four formal requirements of

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rationality, would probably reach understanding and agree upon crucial matters. It is quite a different issue, not to be considered here, whether these formal properties have any impact on the substantial content of the advanced claims.

What follows from the above consideration for the question of dissensus is that, in Habermas' terms, dissensus is feasible only within, and between, lifeworlds or worldviews that are rational. In other cases, what would occur in some contentious issues is simply a lack of communication. In these cases, we can speak of the similarity or dissimilarity of convictions, but not of disagreement in the space of reason. When placed within a rational life background, dissensus turns out to be temporary and tends consistently towards consensus. Nevertheless, Habermas is probably not saying that all four properties cited above have to be included in a lifeworld for it to be rational. It seems that the minimum degree of rationality is constituted by the first property – i.e., the availability of formal concepts of objective, social, etc., worlds – because it enables us to use reasons and thus to take part in argumentation. The other three properties can obviously help to make a lifeworld more rational and, by doing this, make both consensus and dissensus possible. But the condition *sine qua non* seems to be only the first one.

6. ASSERTION, INFERENCE AND THE “GAME OF GIVING AND ASKING FOR REASONS”: BRANDOM’S POINT OF DEPARTURE

In Brandom, as well as in Habermas, human linguistic activity is closely connected with social practices. Here, the main philosophical problems, such as, for example, questions of truth, meaning etc., are redefined so that they be put in a social context. Therefore, in his view on semantics, and also logic, Brandom is deeply involved in the discursive practice of participants in an argumentation. From his pragmatic perspective, a proposition is acceptable, or unacceptable, not by virtue of its mere reference to reality, but on account of reasons having been exchanged between arguers.

Brandom, in *Articulating Reasons* (Brandom 2001), sees the situation in the following way: at its basic level, putting forward a proposition – presenting a logical sentence that things are thus-and-so – should be understood as making *an assertion*, i.e. making a claim that things are thus-and-so with the belief that what is said is really true (“claiming and believing are two sides of the same coin” (Brandom 2001, p. 6)). Whenever someone makes an assertion, he or she, at the same time, is also undertaking a doxastic *commitment*, and therefore he or she is in a way responsible for what is said, and thus is also obliged to justify the advanced claim. Further, when the concept of commitment is at issue, then, in Brandom, the question of the *entitlement* to saying what is said appears: when someone commits oneself to a claim, then he may be asked whether he has good reasons for claiming what is said. Consequently, according to this perspective, every assertion is either undertaking a commitment or fulfilling it by giving reasons that justify one’s commitments (Brandom 2001, p. 43). Apart from that, making an assertion relies also on authorizing further assertions, those that are inferential and communicational consequences of the ones previously advanced. In a word, my making an assertion obliges me not only to justify it, but also to accept everything that inferentially results from it. The correctness of these inferences is guaranteed, revealed and constituted by linguistic rules of using particular concepts and expressions. And this sort of discursive practice, which is crucial for Brandom’s whole account, is called – after Willfrid Sellars – the “game of giving and asking for reasons” (Brandom 2001, pp. 189-196).

In fact, inference, or taking part in the game of giving and asking for reasons, is the most important category in Brandom's entire philosophy, and this is why it is clearly distinguished from all of the other language games:

Claiming, being able to justify one's claims, and using one's claims to justify other claims and actions are not just one among other sets of things one can do with language. They are not on a par with other 'games' one can play. They are what in the first place make possible talking, and therefore thinking: sapience in general (Brandom 2001, pp. 14-15).

In other words, the practice of inferring is considered to be the most fundamental activity through which rationality is revealed, and as such, it is the crucial language game to be played among rational agents. In particular, it plays a crucial role in semantics and pragmatics. For acquiring a concept relies on the practice of using it correctly in an inference, on knowing how to apply a word in accordance with the accepted rules of using language in inferential practice: one has mastered a concept only when one is able to use it both in a premise and in a conclusion of an inference.

For Brandom, the very possibility of making inferences lies in our capacity for comprehending concepts, since "*grasping a concept is mastering the use of a word*" (Brandom 2001, p. 6). Allowing for the fact that, within his inferential account, every concept remains in a relation to other concepts, and that there are no such notions that are separated from others, then having a concept means knowing what the relation is between this concept and the other. Hence, knowing it is just knowing how to use a word, more precisely: knowing how to apply a word in an inference. In other words, the meaning of a notion is here understood in terms of inference that is based on the semantic relation between concepts.

Because of the ubiquity of inference in discursive practice and its central role in acquiring and using concepts, Brandom calls his position a *rationalist* one. Meanwhile, he distinguishes between a weak and a strong sense of being rational:

In a weak sense, any being that engages in linguistic practice, and hence applies concepts, is a *rational* being; in the strong sense, rational beings are not only linguistic beings but, at least potentially, also *logical* beings. This is how we should understand ourselves: as beings that meet this dual expressive condition (Brandom 1994, s. xxi).

Here, being logical – i.e., rational in a strong sense – means being able to exercise correct inferences, to make explicit the implicit correctness of our linguistic, concepts-using practice. In other words: being capable of justifying and challenging claims in an inferential game.

7. INFERENCE AND COMMUNICATION ACCORDING TO BRANDOM

Brandom's inferentialism, as sketched above, is also decisive in his understanding of communication:

For information (whether true or false) to be communicated is for the claims undertaken by one interlocutor to become available to others (who attribute them) as premises for inferences. Communication is the social production and consumption of reasons. So communication (giving and asking for reasons) involves the interaction of the *inferential* articulation of contents that is at the center of the *semantics*... and the *social* articulation of discursive commitments that is at the center of *pragmatics* (Brandom 1994, p. 474).

In this view, communication between two persons is successful, when a claim undertaken by one person, i.e., a sentence that is asserted and to which he or she has

made a commitment, becomes available to another person as a premise in his or her inferential network, which is to say, when the interlocutor is capable of using it correctly in his or her inferences. In other words, understanding my interlocutor's assertion requires that I be able to draw the inferential consequences of my endorsing this assertion. Hence, the idea behind my understanding the interlocutor's claim is to be able to ascribe to him or her the right commitment as a consequence of uttering this claim. Because of the fact that different people, even if they belong to the same lifeworld, have different background knowledge to be used as collateral, or auxiliary, premises in drawing conclusions, a participant in the "game of giving and asking for reasons" has to be able to identify a sentence that would have the same, or similar, significance in relation to his inferential set (Cf. Brandom 1994, pp. 478-482).

According to Brandom, for the communication to be carried out effectively, a sort of inferential *interpretation*, even if hypothetical, is required; it is the interpretation of one's claim against the background of another person's tacit, collateral knowledge. For him, it is necessary for two reasons. The first is that the "speaker and the audience typically have *different* sets of collateral commitments – if they did not, communication would be superfluous (Brandom 1994, p. 475)". These two commitments actually are different, irrespective of whether they belong to the same *Lebenswelt* or not. The second is that "the inferential significance of a claim (what its consequences are and what would count as evidence for it) depends on what *auxiliary hypotheses* are available to serve as collateral premises (Brandom 1994, p. 475)". Since differences in background beliefs have influence on how the participants understand each other's claims, one expression may differ in its inferential significance for people with different backgrounds. Through inferential interpretation in communicating, these differences can be reduced, and thus mutual understanding can be improved. The more both sets of beliefs have in common, the more likely the communication will be effective and the understanding complete.

8. COMMUNICATION AND DISSENSUS IN BRANDOM'S ACCOUNT

Although some of Brandom's critics point out that placing so much stress on differences in the arguers' background beliefs may cause, and actually does, an *interpersonal problem*¹ which must be solved in order to secure the very possibility of communication (Cf. Sharp 2003), nevertheless, these differences are important for the question of dissensus. The point is that people, typically differing in the kind and scope of their collateral knowledge, try to communicate with each other by means of inferences: using one another's utterances as premises in drawing possible conclusions. In doing this they extend the common grounds and become more competent in reasoning correctly and, hence, in understanding each other correctly. Yet, making inferences and taking part in the game of giving and asking for reasons does not necessarily entail an agreement resting on common convictions. It is possible

¹ This problem concerns not only Brandom, but also Habermas. K. Sharp, who discusses this question at great length in relation to both philosophers, defines it thus: "In a conversation, person A utters a sentence, p, with which he associates an inferential significance that is relative to the set of commitments he acknowledges. Person B hears A's utterance, but associates p with the inferential significance that it would have relative to her set of auxiliary commitments. Because A's and B's sets of commitments differ, they associate different inferential significance to p. Thus, B misunderstands A's utterance. The only case when this would not happen would be that in which A and B had the exact same set of background commitments (which is impossible and also eliminates the need for communication) (Sharp 2003, p. 45)". Sharp also argues that Brandom dealt with this problem successfully, whereas Habermas did not.

for a discourse participant to fully grasp what his interlocutor utters, to be able to make inferences and draw out all, or almost all, of the consequences resulting from this utterance, but yet, at the same time, not to endorse the discussed claim. Naturally, in the course of argumentation, the participants may attempt to convince each other of their own points of view, but when this fails, they can stop and stand by their original positions. In other words, they can understand each other, i.e., understand the reasons for the interlocutor's claim, but yet not reach mutual agreement.

And this is the place which dissensus occupies within Brandom's perspective. What main features can be ascribed to it? Apart from the prerequisite conditions requiring that the dissensus result from a free and unconstrained discourse, its main feature is that it is rationally (in the Brandomian sense) motivated. The dissensus, if it occurs, follows from the game of giving and asking for reasons, and therefore, is based on inferences; and thus, if these inferences are legitimate, one can say that the disagreement is also a reasonable one. The second feature is that dissensus does not have to be perceived as a temporary, provisional state in the process of argumentation to be overcome and replaced by consensus. Rather, it may be perceived as a legitimate result of argumentation. Finally, the third feature is that dissensus is not related only to a modernized lifeworld based on the four Habermasian conditions for a rational worldview.

9. CONCLUSION

There is a difference between Habermas and Brandom in understanding communication and dissensus. For Habermas, successful communication inevitably results in reaching understanding. If two people do not reach consensus, it means that they have broken some of the rules of correct, rational discussion. Actually they do not understand each other, because for Habermas: "Reasons cannot be understood unless their 'weight' is estimated at the same time" (Habermas 2000, p. 325). Thus, any deep, permanent dissensus is not possible among rational, unconstrained agents. It always results from not fulfilling some conditions of rational discourse. In Habermas the basic sense of communication² relies on reaching consensus:

When a speaker with his speech act raises a truth claim for a proposition for which he is prepared to provide reasons, if necessary, he does not only – in Gricean sense – 'give (the interpreter) to understand' that he holds 'p' to be true. He not only wants to be understood correctly, he also wants to *reach understanding* (*sich verständigen*) with someone about 'p'. If feasible, the addressee is supposed to accept the truth claim (Habermas 2000, p. 346).

For Brandom, dissensus is possible even in cases of effective communication. It seems possible to acknowledge one's entitlement to 'p', but yet not to endorse this same 'p'. On the other hand it seems also possible to hold 'p' but for quite different reasons. Coming to dissensus does not have to mean that some rational rules of discourse have been violated. It can result from the different inferential backgrounds of the participants in a discourse. Brandom's account of communication is different from that of Habermas. It is perspectival in its character and its aim is rather trying to

² Here, I am referring to the standard account of communicative activity as presented in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. However, in his later paper, 'Some Further Clarifications of the Concept of Communicative Rationality' (Habermas 1996), he differentiated between strong and weak communicative action, which seems to allow for the possibility of more permanent dissensus and to ascribe it to weak communicative action. But it would rather concern only Habermasian "actor-dependent reasons" (Cf. Habermas 1996).

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see, or to understand, the other's perspective. This can lead to consensus but it does not have to.

The essence of communication is taken to consist in coming to be able to navigate smoothly across the doxastic and inferential gulf excavated between interlocutors by their differing commitments, so that each can gather information from the other (...) and see the world from the other's perspective (...). But nothing is made of the notion of *face to face, reciprocal* communicative interaction aimed at the sort of understanding that consist in *convergence* of the contents of commitments as specified *de re*, from one's participant's perspective, and *de dicto*, from the other (Brandom 2000, p. 362).

Brandom seems much closer to the everyday experience of participants in argumentation: Even reasonable people often differ in their opinions, also in academic life, professional conferences and meetings, and yet this does not mean that they break some of the rules of discourse. Of course, some problems in Brandom's theory still remain. Can we undertake common actions when we have differing opinions? What about a situation of conflict when some acceptable solution has to be found between two parties? Brandom claims, in opposition to Habermas, that mutual understanding based on common convictions is not required for the undertaking of joint projects (Brandom 2000, p. 363). In making this claim, he refers to Sellars' analysis of so-called 'we'-intentions (Ibidem). Thus, the concept of dissensus is still present in Brandom's conception and does not exclude the rationality of discourse.

[link to commentary](#)

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